

Orthodoxy/Orthopraxia, Syndiakonia in Practice

Very Reverend Sebastian Skordallos

Dear Co-ministers in Christ,

Your presence here today demonstrates your love and deep commitment to Christ and His Church. Both clergy and laity join hands in ministering the needs of God's people. The theme of our conference, *Orthodoxy/Orthopraxia, Syndiakonia in Practice*, deals with the reason why we are here and how both clergy and laity can improve our ministry in the Church. But we cannot address Christian Ministry without addressing at the same time our faith (Orthodoxy) and its practice (Orthopraxia). For this reason, first I will give you a brief Biblical and theological view of Orthodox Ministry. Then I will proceed to examine and reflect on how both clergy and laity have shared the Ministry of the Church, and will talk about their misconceptions and difficulties in practice. And finally, I will offer you some ideas on how we can improve our Ministry. In this endeavor I was aided by the Gospel, St. John Chrysostom's speech *On the Priesthood* and by John Harris's book *Stress Power and Ministry*.

Orthodoxy/Orthopraxia: Orthodox Ministry

We call ourselves Orthodox because we believe that our Church has 'ὀρθή δόξα' (correct belief-doctrine) about God. We rely for our faith not only on the Bible, but also in the Holy Tradition of the Church, how the saints of the Church lived that faith and expressed it in the Ecumenical Councils. Therefore, faith (Orthodoxy) and practice (Orthopraxia) in the Orthodox Church are seen as one and the same thing, and one cannot exist without the other. St. James in his letter says,

But someone will say, 'one person has faith, another has actions.' My answer is, 'show me how anyone can have faith without actions.' I will show you my faith by my actions. Do you believe that there is only one God? Good! The demons also believe- and tremble with fear. You fool! Do you want to be shown that faith without actions is useless? How was our ancestor Abraham put right with God? It was through his actions, when he offered his son Isaac on the altar. Can't you see? His faith and his actions worked together; his faith was made perfect through his actions.¹

If faith and practice are one and the same thing then ministry (Diakonia) is the witness and the validation of our faith. It is the responsibility of every Christian to care for others. St. John Chrysostom says: "I cannot myself believe it possible for anyone to be saved who never works for the salvation of his neighbor."² Moreover, as St. Paul says, each and every member of the Church has a specific ministry he/she is called by God to fulfill. In his words:

All of you, then, are Christ's body, and each one is a part of it. In the Church, then God has appointed first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues.³

Our faith in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity implies that although we may have different ministries, there is always unity in a common purpose. The life of the Holy Trinity demonstrates that fact: the Father plans our salvation; the Son carries out that plan with His Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection; the Holy Spirit fulfills that plan on the day of Pentecost and continues to bring people to the Ark of Salvation and sanctify them. Jesus prayed to His Father for the same unity to exist among believers when He said, "Holy Father! Keep them safe by the power of Your Name, the Name You gave Me, so they may be one just as We are One."⁴

¹ James 2:18-22

² St. John Chrysostom: *On the Priesthood*, Translated by Graham Neville, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984, p. 150

³ 1 Corinthians 12:27-28

⁴ John 17:11

On the practical level we experience the revelation of the Holy Trinity through the sacraments of the Church. Both clergy and laity alike receive the love of God the Father, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. When we receive the sacrament, i.e. the sacrament of Priesthood, Baptism, Chrismation, Confession, Holy Eucharist, Marriage, or Holy Unction, we all (clergy and laity) partake of the saving grace of God. God's grace is not divided but rather the sacraments which number seven correspond to our needs and circumstances-the same grace both clergy and laity alike are asked to witness to others and become ministers of God. The priest is asked to serve the sacraments, the Baptized Christian is asked to become a light and to shine upon people's lives, the married couple is asked to share their lives with each other and together with the rest of the world and when we are fed with the Holy Body and Precious Blood of our Lord we are asked to go in the world and feed God's people. If we fail to recognize our ministry in the world then our Orthodoxy doesn't equal Orthopraxia but heterodoxy. Let us now examine how both clergy and laity share the ministry of the church in practice and if our practice matches our orthodoxy.

Reflections on Syndiakonia (shared ministry) in Practice

Clergy have been taught in theological schools that the priesthood is a gift from God and a service to God and His people. But when priests undertake their leadership positions in parishes their enthusiasm is soon replaced by a different reality. Power struggles, anxiety, injustice, and anger often dominate their relationships. Overwhelmed by those problems, clergy and laity alike choose to ignore their emotions fearing their power. Instead they choose to deal with the symptoms of their feelings rather than confront each other and communicate their needs. Other times, they prefer the safety of an illusion by totally denying the existence of any problem rather than having to face their own guilt and inadequacies. The result of this denial is that the feelings and issues do not disappear, but rather undermine their ministry. St. John Chrysostom, speaking about the priest, proclaims:

No one ever takes into consideration that a bit of depression, pain, anxiety, or in many cases anger, may cloud the clarity of his mind and prevent his productions from coming forth unalloyed...and obviously fall below the standard of his real ability.⁵

When we block out our emotions or prevent others from expressing them, we prevent at the same time our needs to be met and our creative side to be suppressed.

Clergy and laity have been conditioned to act a role rather than being al [sic] and authentic with each other. Furthermore, that perceived role sometimes is not consistent with Orthodoxy. Laity expect the priest to be busy, to produce, to implement programs for the Church while they pay little or no attention to the quality of his ministry or his personal needs. On the other hand, laity perceive their role in the Church as passive receivers who need to show up on church on Sunday and receive communion with the only obligation to meet their financial pledge. This attitude that only the priest needs to care and do things for others while the rest of the faithful watch and criticize is neither Orthodox nor does it help the spiritual growth of the believers.

Priests in the past have enjoyed an undisputed authority. When "Father", "His Grace", or "His Eminence" spoke, they were listened to and nobody dared to argue with them, much less question them. Nowadays there is a "growing insistence of laity that the pastor's use of power is everybody's business."⁶ This resulted in a growing tension between clergy and laity. If we ignore this tension it will undermine our ministry, but if we accept and manage it properly it can become a dynamic force for a new vitality in the Church.

One of the issues that both pastors and laity wrestle with is the issue of control. We often confuse 'control' with 'authority', while in fact they have two different meanings, i.e. "the capacity to have one's advice

⁵ Chrysostom, p. 131

⁶ *Stress Power and Ministry* by John C. Harris, The Alban Institute Inc., 1977, p. 47

and insight take seriously [authority] versus the power to decide what happens [control].”⁷ In other words, if we do not have the genuine support of the people, then our authority will become ineffective. We find ample examples in both clergy and laity (i.e. parish councils) who attempt to control what is going on in the Church. The result is that we reap what we have sown by finding ourselves isolated and standing alone in the middle of a crowd that mistrusts and resents us. If as pastors we want to acquire authority to lead we can no longer count on our ‘collar’ but we have to learn to listen and take others seriously. The same holds true for laity. If they want their pastor to demonstrate leadership they have to permit him to express his own values and convictions and enter in an honest and truthful dialogue with him. The symptoms of dullness, indifference and boredom that exist in parishes and Church organizations are often a result of failing to listen to the heartbeat of our people, their needs, anxieties, disappointments and fears, and most of all to their hopes, aspirations, and their vision for the Church.

We have to realize that our Churches no longer serve as the center for community life as in the past. As the immigrant families become second- and third-generation Americans of Greek descent, and mixed marriages (Orthodox with non-Orthodox) become the norm rather than the exception, people begin to look elsewhere for belonging and to have their needs met when their Church does not fulfill their expectations. Our challenge then is how much are we willing to examine, assess and reflect on our ministry so that our ministry can be more effective.

Suggesting that we need to pay more attention to the needs and expectations of our own people doesn’t mean that we should do that on the expense of sacrificing our own values and convictions. There are the temptations of conformity and dependency that can be as harmful as control. St. John Chrysostom warns us against “failure to scrutinize and rebuke, or, more likely, doing so beyond reason with the humble while no one dares so much as to open his lips against those who wield power.”⁸ The temptation to be pleasers and dependent on others is more real among priests since they are not volunteers as the laity and because of the administrative structure of our Church. We are all aware that if we don’t please our parishioners and especially our parish councils, and if we come in conflict with our Hierarchy, we put ourselves and our families in jeopardy. In the words of Harris, “we are reluctant to take risks with whatever gives us bread and belonging.”⁹ The price that clergy have to pay when they have to be totally dependent on both the laity and the Hierarchy of the Church is low self esteem, detachment, and depression since they sacrifice their own feelings and judgments in order to please others. Dependency is not only a temptation for clergy but also for laity. Many faithful depend on the clergy for everything that goes on in the Church while they passively observe and criticize. They are unwilling to challenge them or take any initiatives themselves for fear of confrontation. Thus they become angry and frustrated about the state of the Church but prefer to be on the outside looking in rather than having to face their own responsibility.

While in recent years we have seen a greater willingness in laity to become involved in the matters of the Church they still struggle to figure out their role. I believe that the laity have been conditioned by the clergy to see their role as “secular” while clergy believe their role to be “spiritual”. The laity according to this notion is responsible for the money and the housekeeping business of the church and the priest is responsible for the spiritual matters (the sacraments, the visitation of the sick and the faithful, etc.). The “heresy” in this notion is that it divides the body of Christ by separating the clergy from the laity. What goes on in the altar is everybody’s business as much as the priest’s, and what goes on outside the altar is also the priest’s business. The bottom line is that both clergy and laity need to reflect on their ministry and involvement in the Church and help each other recognize his/her spiritual role in the Church. The dichotomy of roles that exists in the Church needs to be replaced by the unity of the faith and the “building of the Body of Christ.”

⁷ Harris, p. 64

⁸ Chrysostom, p. 78

⁹ Harris, p. 94

In summary, we have seen that when emotions are ignored or blocked out, they surface in a negative way and interfere with our ministry. Both clergy and laity in their attempt to share the ministry of the Church wrestle with issues of authority and control as well as the issue of dependency. In the next section I will attempt to give some solutions and ideas on how to deal with those issues and how we can improve our ministry.

Sharing the Ministry of the Church (Improving our Syndiakonia)

Our Church leaders (whether clergy or laity) need to create an environment where everyone would feel safe to express his/her emotions, judgments and opinions. But in order to do that they need first to be ready to manage and facilitate those emotions and at the same time feel secure enough to listen to what others have to say without being defensive. Harris calls this “autonomy” and defines it as: “To be autonomous is to stand on one’s feet in authentic relationship with other persons.”¹⁰ Clergy and key-lay leaders need to learn that what matters is not to act a role in the Church but to be real and ready to be influenced and influence others. Autonomy is the opposite of dependence. When one is totally dependent on others he/she becomes a prisoner of people’s wishes. But when one is autonomous he/she affirms himself in the presence of others while he/she remains open to the opinions, feelings and values of others. St. John Chrysostom affirms the same position when he says about priests:

But if a man has devoted himself to the whole community and has been forced to endure the sins of all, and still remains firm and unwavering, piloting his soul through the tempest as in a calm, he is the one who deserves everyone’s applause and admiration, for he has given proof enough of his own prowess.¹¹

Of course, one may say, “That’s good, but is easier said than done.” When one sees the hard reality of structural dependence of priests who depend on the parish council’s and the Hierarchy’s hiring and firing, he may have to think twice before ‘making any waves’. But if we consider that the price we have to pay if we don’t assert ourselves is risking losing our very souls, then we find that it is better to be hurt and vulnerable than to enjoy a pseudo-security.

Our Hierarchy as well as our priests need to learn that sharing their authority is in their benefit as well as life-saving for the laity. Harris notes:

While we still put the minister at the top of the organizational chart and underscore his or her authority with ordination rites and ecclesiastical law, the fact is that influence of pastors is sustained increasingly through less visible medium- that of their interpersonal transactions.¹²

Also, St. Paul tells us that in our ministry we don’t only take into consideration the will of God but also the expectations of the people. He writes, “We take thought for things honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men.”¹³ If we want to improve our ministry, we need to be aware that we cannot control others but rather work with them. As St. John Chrysostom put it:

...It is necessary to make a man better not by force but by persuasion. We neither have authority granted us by law to restrain sinners, nor if it were, should we know how to use it, since God gives the crown to those who are kept from evil, not by force, but by choice.¹⁴

In our attempt to share authority, both clergy and laity experience anxiety and tension: anxiety, because we don’t want to let go of our control, and tension, because of the demands and expectations of others. Both anxiety and tension, if managed properly, can become a source of growth, new vitality and

¹⁰ Harris, p. 60

¹¹ Chrysostom, p. 144

¹² Harris, p. 79

¹³ 2 Corinthians 8:21

¹⁴ Chrysostom, p. 56

renewal in our churches. One way to deal with tension is to balance opposing tendencies. Talking about priests, Harris suggests:

To sustain the capacity of personal growth, practicing ministers need constantly to balance opposing tendencies within themselves, and between themselves and their congregations...the tension between comforting and confronting, between encouraging healthy dependence and stimulating growth toward independence.¹⁵

Our church leaders should not deal from non-negotiable positions but rather respond to the needs of the people as the situation requires without sacrificing their conscience. St. John Chrysostom wisely tells us that the priest:

...must be many-sided. I say many-sided not as a charlatan, as a flatterer, or a hypocrite; but absolutely open and frank of speech, able to condescend to good purpose, when the situation requires and to be alike kindly or severe...Great condescension and great strictness are both needed. And all these different methods look to one object: the glory of God and the edification of the Church.¹⁶

As clergy we need to realize that our Ministry in the Church is not to control each aspect of the parish life but rather to demonstrate leadership that is grounded on the needs of our people. In order to do that we need to be open to influence and be influenced by the laity and willing to share our authority with them since we can only exist in relation to them. As we have seen in the introduction, the priest is not the only one who receives a sacrament (the sacrament of priesthood) but the laity also receives many sacraments and they are called to share them with each other and the world. Harris calls for a new perception in understanding our role as pastors and notes:

From this perspective, the pastor is seen, not as the sacramental person, but as one sacramental presence among many in rich, differentiated expression of functions, talents, individuals and tasks in the congregation's life. Pastors are learning to see that having influence does not mean calling all the shots.¹⁷

Harris continues to say:

Integrative influence is power in which the key parties are accessible to each other [when] pastors and the key laity leaders treat each other as partners, informing (presenting facts, ideas, experiences, judgments, using each other's resources) together until a decision is worked out.¹⁸

When we find indifference, boredom and apathy in our Church we should ask ourselves if we have created an environment of trust in our community with the avenues of communication open. Also we need to ask if we projected an image of Father or Mr. 'Perfect' to the point that others felt that any attempt to contribute to the Church would not be good enough. If both clergy and laity share in the Ministry of the Lord and the Church then we need to learn to be partners, collaborators, negotiators and, most of all, we need to feel equal in power (authority). Neither the Bible nor the Holy Tradition of the Church teaches that one member of the Church is greater than the other. And as clergy we need to reject the non-Orthodox notion that we are the only ones who have the divine grace and right to be ministers. As we have seen earlier, God's gift to minister to others was given to all the faithful alike. Sometimes our interests and ideas may differ but when one goes to church he/she wants a caring community. The contribution of clergy and laity in this respect is to demonstrate that we care not only in words but deeds. In God's house there is always room for everybody, and if sometimes we experience anxiety and tension because of each other's expectations, let us be courageous enough not to deny their existence but to use them so we can improve our ministry and become the best we

¹⁵ Harris, p. 140

¹⁶ Chrysostom, p. 142

¹⁷ Harris, pp. 48-49

¹⁸ Harris, pp. 80-81

can be. Let us not forget that we are accountable to each other and to God. And "...as fire tests metals, so the touchstone of the ministry distinguishes men's souls."¹⁹ In our Orthopraxia (orthodox practice) we need to discover how much orthodox we are. But don't despair, because there is always repentance!

Thank you, and God bless you, dear co-ministers,

V. Rev. S. Skordallos

May 30, 1991

¹⁹ Chrysostom, p. 142; 1 Corinthians 3:13